DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 348 844 FL 020 445

AUTHOR Bourne, Jill
TITLE Towards an Alternative Model of Second Language Learning.
PUB DATE 86
NOTE 13p.; In: Meara, Paul, Ed. Spoken Language. Papers from the Annual Meeting of the British Association for Applied Linguistics (Edinburgh, Scotland, September 1985); see FL 020 441.
PUB TYPE Reports - Evaluative/Feasibility (142) -- Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Foreign Countries; Language Research; *Linguistic Theory; *Oral Language; Psycholinguistics; Second Language Learning; *Second Languages; *Sociocultural Patterns

ABSTRACT

A discussion of classroom second language learning focuses on whether or not the concept of natural development in a target language is an appropriate research perspective. It is argued that the current psycholinguistic framework for such research should be replaced by the perspective that language learning is a social and contextual, not maturational, process. The description of one classroom in which young learners of English as a Second Language come from many linguistic and cultural backgrounds is used to illustrate this contention. It is proposed that this social approach to language development is supported by recent research on cognitive development, which finds that the latter is an interactive and not an isolated psychological phenomenon. Therefore, language development is an intermental social process, closely connected with the development of thought but also closely connected with cultural processes and practices of society. A 26-item bibliography is included. (MSE)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

4. Towards an alternative model of second language learning

Jill Bourne

University of Southampton

ED 348844

In this paper I want to question what the concepts of 'natural' development to a 'target language' might mean, and whether these concepts are useful ones for the purpose of research into language processes in the classroom. I shall suggest that a social rather than a psycholinguistic framework would be more useful for studying language processes for educational purposes. Throughout, I will suggest applied linguistics cannot be a neutral science. Following Dewey, I want to show that 'any enquiry into what is deeply and inclusively human enters perforce into the specific area of morals. It does so whether it intends to and whether it is even aware of it or not' (Dewey 1950, p20).

I need to begin by clearing some ground about alternative interpretations of 'natural development', to ask if we have to see language development as a natural process within the dominant paradigm presented by Chomsky.

There seem to be two senses in which we might use the term 'natural development', and these two senses need to be distinguished. In one, the 'input' is relevant. This is the development of the ability to use English without the formal teaching of grammar. (I shall concentrate on the learning of English to avoid confusion between concepts of learning language and learning a language.) In this, learning English remains a social process; one learns from people, but not from drills, grammar books or structures on the blackboard. In this, the sort of English one uses reflects the people one is among. In the second sense, the type of 'input' is irrelevant. 'Natural development' is a sort of maturational process, the unfolding of an innate language ability so that English 'grows', given some exposure to English in the environment.

An analogy is with physical development. The body will grow provided it is given food, but the surface structure of the body has nothing to do with the surface structure of the food - it has its own genetic blueprint. So the logical structure of the particular language will emerge despite 'performance' variations. However, the logical structure of this language would not necessarily mean standard English, or 'native speaker norms'. Even Chomsky's 'cancer theory' of language, like many cancer theories,

FL 020 445

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

John Hawkins

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)"

suggests environmental triggers for particular instances of language growth. We all develop Language, but in doing so acquire particular languages. The particular language we acquire from the environmental triggers provided may be what is called an 'interlanguage', for 'interlanguages should be considered no more deviant than ordinary grammars; they, too, are based on properties of the human mind' (Cook 1985, p13). Although the environment may not provide **sufficient** evidence to learn a language, it does at least provide the positive evidence **necessary** to help the learner fix the ways the universal principles of grammar apply to the actual language learned. So, the forms acquired by the learner will depend on the language used around the learner, by the people s/he observes and the social practices in which they are engaged. Whether this acquired language is classified as a language, a dialect, an accent or indeed, an interlanguage, is a social issue dependent on political and theoretical positions taken up at that paticular time (Corder 1973, p53).

So, it seems that even in an innatist paradigm, 'natural development' of English has the first sense I mentioned; learning English remains a social process, not a maturational process in which type of 'input' is irrelevant. One has a choice, then, of whether to focus on innate processes or to focus on social influences.

Now let us turn to the concept of the 'target language'. Although for theoretical purposes Chomsky may work with the norms of the 'ideal speaker-hearer in the homogeneous speech community', these norms may in practice be those of a single idiolect. Chomsky gives no reason for supposing (and there are many reasons for not supposing) that there are any such norms for any particular language. So, how can we talk about the 'natural' progression of learners towards the 'target language'? Comparing learner language with 'native speaker norms' or 'target norms' can **only** be evaluative, not nomological. Downes (1984) clarifies this issue: 'From one perspective language is a dynamic process, a continua in many dimensions. From another, it is an institutional entity deeply identified with the life of a society, and intricately involved in both its political and historical development and its social structure. In this view, the language is a codified set of norms in which the ongoing processes of variation and change are partially repressed from general social consciousness' (p37).

It is this repression of variation, and construction of a unified, yet deeply dividing, codified set of norms as a 'natural' standard that is one of the main themes of my paper. However, I wonder if we CAN separate the two perspectives as Downes suggests. The way we look at language is itself deeply identified with the life of society, and coloured by socio-historical preoccupations. Perhaps I need to stress that these so-called 'norms' are rarely

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

statistically assessed nor reached by consensus and agreement. They may be instituted accidentally, by, for example, the technological requirements of the printing press; they may be imposed officially, as standard French was imposed by the Académie Française (Balibar 1974 explores the history and ideological implications of that move interestingly); or by the historically dominant group over a period of time, reflecting both speech community norms and valued cultural traditions. Hymes (1974) says that linguistics, like grammar, is an 'instrument of hegemony'. The study of rules of usage and the rules of use, like those rules themselves, is socio-historical.

In second language development research, the status of the norm has always been blurred. Second language research has concentrated in its studies of children's second language acquisition, on the children of the researchers themselves, or those of their 'speech community', just as many L1 studies have done (cf. Hatch 1978) The target language was then transparently shared by learner and researcher, as the only model the child had access to. Research into adult learners and children in schools seems to have adopted unquestioningly the same 'norms', the linguistic usages of 'standard English' as set out in the idealised grammar, and the communicative strategies of the researchers' speech communities.

Second language research has always been closely connected to the second language classrom, although often uncritical of its practices. Its interests are empirical in the sense that Habermas defines as directed to interest in technical control (cf Giddens 1976). Its implicit purpose is to 'improve' the method of learning a language; that is to bring the learner to a predetermined 'standard' of a language. While this may be a legitimate 'selection from the culture' for a syllabus, in research it legitimises one particular variety of the language. It seems to have adopted the pedagogic norm (Littlewood 1981) as the norm against which development processes are observed, frequently conflating this with 'native speaker norms' and 'the target language' (ie. the language the learner is supposed to be aiming for). In the formal classroom context, the dominant norm would be the pedagogic norm, conveniently listed in the grammatical and/or functional syllabus, both idealised descriptions of the language abstracted from a generally unspecified speech community. Like any syllabus, this is an explicit or implicit 'selection from the culture' (Lawton 1978) and, as such, should be open to public debate and change.

Corder (1973) stressed that the variety of language offered as the classroom model should be chosen on the basis of politico-social factors as well as its communicative potential for satisfying learners' purposes. However, once established and legitimised, the language of the classroom is actually 'produced', BECOMES the language of the classroom, as only progress towards its norm is

observed, and it is evaluated in the syllabus' own terms. Rose (1980) has produced a fascinating study to show how language is socially constituted, produced differently, at different times for different groups. She shows how at the same period of time, language in education meant classics for the rich, literature for the middle classes, and clear expression for the poor, this ideology enshrined in separate but concurrent educational policies. Language as a tool of thought for one group and language as the acquisition of a system of structures for another, within the same school, can be seen closer to our own time in the Bullock Report (Bullock 1975). Corder (1973) said that the answer to the question 'What is Language?' should be 'What do you want to know for?'. This might be better rephrased 'Who do you want to know for?'

If language is socially constituted and produced differently in schools at different times, through the practices of evaluation and monitoring and in the types of task set, then children's use and awareness of language seems likely to reflect these practices, and so also to differ historically. In this sense again, language development is not natural. Certainly, as researchers, our perceptions of children's language will be altered by our theory of language. This suggests that the context to which we appeal to interpret children's utterances must include a critical analysis of the network of theories which influence the interpretation of the situation, and the sociohistorical situation in which the utterance takes place. What I am suggesting is that we make the language we find, by our way of observing and evaluation. Rose warns that defining language as 'natural' works to 'syphon off the more urgently needed recognition of social divisions and conflicts' in which education takes place. Paradoxically, for researchers who advocate 'natural acquisition', once research moves out of the formal second language classroom into an apparently natural learning environment, the notion of the 'natural development' of the English language becomes more puzzling.

I need now to describe briefly a classroom context that I have worked in. This is a primary school classroom, where the children have contact mainly with just one teacher. The room is broken up into small areas, making small private spaces where the children sit around tables in groups of two to six. There is a square carpet in the centre of the room where the children come together with the teacher for class discussions and stories. There are 29 children in the classroom. They are 8 to 9 years old, so in Piaget's terms, they would mostly be in the stage of concrete operations. 21 are bilinguals in the sense of using at least two languages in their daily lives. Three languages are heard in the classroom: Bengali, Cantonese and English. Twelve children speak Bengali; seven speak Cantonese; seven are monolingual in English, but one of these is bi-dialectal. Other languages known but not spoken are Pushtu and Farsi. Two children say they have known but forgotten Vietnamese;

one says the same about Finnish. Many children learn Arabic after school. Many of the children are skilled at mimicking their peers, the teacher and characters on TV. Their teacher is monolingual in English, but is not local and uses North of England dialect features and idioms in informal talk. A Chinese/English bilingual teacher works in the classroom once a week, with mixed groups of children. Seven of the children have been in England for less than two years. Six children have been in the school since the nursery.

Given free choice, the children tend to move into shared language and sex groupings, although these operate bilingually. However, the social scene is flexible, with best friends, quarrels, rivalries and alliances - and most groups have at least one 'language outsider'. However, Bengali and Cantonese do not seem to be acquired, or picked up by other language users, although there is a lot of 'comprehensible input' linked to concrete operations - the tasks at hand. Some children know some 'rude words', numbers and words about festivals that have been taught in class projects (e.g. Chinese New Year, Eid). The Bengali and Cantonese communities are numerically large and well-established in the area. Most bilingual children atttend community language classes out of school. However, most children say they use English at home as well as in school, usually speaking English at least part of the time with siblings and friends. I frequently heard English used among children even in their community language classes, and their teachers confirm that this was not just because of my presence. The work setting is carefully organised by the teacher into mixed language, mixed sex and to some extent, mixed ability groupings. Children have their own place at special tables, to which the teacher gives a lot of thought. The main areas of work are maths, reading and project work, which involves drawing, discussing, painting, writing and model making, and each project extends over a number of weeks and links up with a theme running right through the year. All the children do the same work, usually individually.

There is no obvious fixed and focussed 'pedagogic norm'. The teacher believes the best way to teach English is 'not to teach it'. She believes children pick it up from one another. Children's spoken English is never corrected, and neither is their written English, although the teacher regularly asks them to read parts back to her aloud and if they self-correct, the teacher 'draws their attention' to the written form.

Language is not problematic in this classroom. The teacher rarely discusses it. The children speak in their own voices. Language development is not seen as producing correct structures either in spoken or written English, but as communicating meaning, participating effectively in activities, interacting, finding a place in the social groups. In fact, incorrect formulations can be seen as creative and imaginative, and preferred to standard

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

expressions, seen as dull and common-place. However, although pedagogic linguistic norms are not fixed, there are other norms firmly established in the classroom, of behaviour in contexts, of presentation of work, of routines and of social relationships. There is a common classroom culture which it took an outsider time to penetrate.

This is just one rough picture of some aspects of this classroom, to make one rather specific point. I want to ask how can we speak of natural development to the target language in this situation?

Some applied linguists may want to wash their hands of this situation, pleading 'submersion', 'junky data', 'pidginisation' or 'fossilisation'. I want to avoid this L1/L2 normative debate. What this situation does for me is to call the whole notion of one target language, and the notion of natural development to a unitary natural language into question.

The sociolinguist Le Page has written (1978) of societies as producing focussed or diffuse norms. The homogeneous FL clasroom would seem to be an environment based on focussed linguistic and cultural norms, the primary multi-lingual classroom I have described offers diffuse norms. These focussed or diffuse norms, Le Page says, are realised in invariable or variable grammatical forms. In a diffuse society, learners may not have access to one distinct set of shared norms. Rather, each individual in a community observes the behaviour of the others, 'extrapolating from observed variability towards various idealised models with invariable rules' (1978, p10). These models match real group norms to the extent that the individual has access to observation of that group. In the clasroom, then, one can no longer assume that the teacher's language is the target language, nor that there is a single target language. The crucial issues for both participants and analysts are: which are the norms providing the standard of correctness towards which the speakers are orientating themselves; why are they selecting these in particular, and how does this choice affect the way we should inerpret the utterance as a whole?

The important issue for this paper is that grammatical realisations appear to be encoding not only differences between possible socal groupings, but also differences in the way a speaker can take up a position in discourse within or in opposition to these social groups. The form, the meaning and the subject who speaks are no longer separate. The social position the speaker takes up marks the form and adds to the meaning.

Children producing these forms seem then not only to be reflecting social structure and self-identity, but actually to be producing the social structures and personal identities within the classroom. But I think we can go further than this. The feedback that children

receive through language suggests that both meanings and forms are being acquired together in the classroom, and that these meaning/form pairs are unlikely to match exactly those of others, only progressively approximating to those of others when one has had close access to them in a shared lifestyle.

This is a distinctly different view from the usual telementation model underlying much applied linguistic theory, of predetermined concepts held inside the head of some fixed, unitary ego and 'encoded' for transmission to another fixed thinking being, who then 'decodes' the 'message' back into fixed concepts using a shared code. Harris (1981) has offered a cogent criticism of this fixed code fallacy from a linguist's point of view, and has recently received philosophical support from Baker and Hacker (1984) who argue that the language system resembles not so much a logical calculus as a road system, growing, changing, incidental, accidental, certainly historical: 'it is certainly open to us to look at a natural language as a loosely integrated normative practice, a motley of rules on a par with the common law' (p375).

If language is seen as located in space and time, like a road system, historically, the synchronic axis at any time would be less of a distinct, systematic cross-section than a more flexible system of differences; some stereotypes of persons, concepts, ways of using language would have been formed, but as systems of relations, or differences between uses, rather than as distinct sets of variable systems. This person is like this, as opposed to that; this form/meaning is found in this sort of text, but not in that; used in this context, not that; used by people like me, used by people not like me.

It seems to me possible that using a model of language development based on meaning/form pairs or lexical differences, we would not need to make a deep first language/second language division, but could see later languages developing as part of a differential language use with certain persons in certain contexts, carrying some distinct meanings developed in those contexts. There is also the possibility of exploring and possibly resolving the present problem of defining the 'learner' in my multi-lingual situation. There are many bilinguals in my classroom. Who are the second language learners? Is possessing a language an inheritance, a state of grace? Or is the L1/L2 difference one of proficiency (Stern 1983)? If so, at what point may I say that I have acquired the language? For if I am to say English is only acquired when children function successfully in the classroom, then what do I call those monolingual English speaking children who are not successfully dealing with the linguistic demands being made on them in class?

Child development theorists (e.g. Kessel et al. 1983) have begun to query whether early experience is as crucial as has been thought.

They suggest that human beings are epigenetic, not just getting larger (more of the same), but structurally elaborating on themselves, changing and developing throughout their lives. It seems time we took epigenesis seriously. Language acquisition in anything more than a crude morphological sense does not end in the years before school. We need to allow in our theory of language for the taking on of new styles, dialects and languages throughout our lives, not as distinct systems, but as an integrated system of choices. What a critique of fixed code theories suggests is much closer attention to language use in context. Context here is no longer the objective, transparent ground appealed to, to justify an interpretation of an utterance, but language and context become mutually determining. The view of language that is emerging here is one where forms and concepts are seen as produced together in relation to the positions taken up in discourse by the speaker. Rather than a natural development regardless of context, the social practices in which language is used would be crucial for its development.

This social perspective on language seems to be supported by changes in recent cognitive development research which is looking at the development of thought not as an isolated psychological phenomenon, but as an interactive process. The Piagetian 'natural' model of cognitive development on which much of the rhetoric of primary school practice is based, has come under increasing fire as a cultural rather than a natural construction (Donaldson 1978, Walkerdine 1982, Kessel 1983). It appears increasingly likely that the level of formal operations is not an inevitable target, but the result of the experience of a particular way of upbringing and schooling. More than that, it seems likely that language plays a vital interactive part in the development of concepts and most particularly, the practices of literacy (Vygotsky 1962, 1978, Donaldson 1978, Walkerdine 1982, Olsen 1977).

Problem solving has come to be seen as something which is distributed across individuals, rather than something that happens inside individuals, and learning is being redefined as a shift in the distribution of responsibility for completing a task. Following Vygotsky, development is 'the change in the locus of regulation of joint activity between people in which the more knowledgeable person can be said to be seeking to shift responsibility for parts of the interaction to the child, while the child seeks to master as much of the activity as possible'. In this framework, it is clear that performance precedes competence. Furthermore, the framework clearly implies that 'development' is defined in relation to implicit social norms; i.e. the assumption that adult ways are more 'advanced' is replaced by a more explicit recognition of their being more efficient for certain socially valued techniques or operations.

Moving even further away from a non-interventionist, natural development position, Francis (1983) suggests that children may need actually to be persuaded to give up or at least modify their personal knowledge and ways of understanding to meet the conventional public forms of the classroom. Education, she implies, although speaking here specificly of reading, is the process of making the breakthrough from personal knowledge based on limited experience to the freedom of the public range of ways of knowing and communicating.

Relying on natural development, it seems, may limit access to publicly valued modes of thought and expression. Instead of explicitly denying access to educational goals, Bernstein suggests that the provision of schooling which treats educational goals as natural rather than as cultural developments will locate failure to achieve these goals in the children themselves. Schools have always had a selective function. This function can be masked by a pedagogy which appears developmental, but which continues to evaluate performance by a set of norms which are not made explicit to the learners. Only those who share the knowledge of the valued norms will be able to succeed. Sharp and Green (1975) explore the application of this theory in the primary school.

From this perspective, the nurturing classroom which naturalises development is a place of covert evaluation, which produces learners at different levels of competence. From a structuralist perspective these levels are produced largely according to whether the children's backgrounds match the teachers', i.e. whether they share focussed norms. From a more recent perspective (Walkerdine 1983), the situation is more complex, and focussed norms are achieved by the ways in which children and teachers position themselves within the social practices of the classroom, rather than directly determined by social structures. Nevertheless, the classroom remains a place where children are ordered and graded. From both these standpoints, these differences in level are not the teachers' responsibility, and do not reflect on their professionalism or ideals, for language development is an internal process, and differences in achievement are located in the personal characteristics of the learner (aptitude, motivation, attitudes).

I think that we must reject this view. I hope I have shown here that there is no such thing as a 'natural' rather than a social laguage. There can be no natural development to a cultural norm.

The learner centred/teacher centred dichotomy is limiting and misleading. To enable learners to succeed in the cognitive tasks adults have decided are valuable enough to put children in school for, to be learner centred in this sense, is to offer alternative 'texts' linked to familiar practices, to move from established interests to new interests, to develop what Kristeva calls

'intertextuality', the ability to call on and combine a range of models, to draw on a 'mosaic of quotations', to develop new forms and meanings together in new practices, and so to extend and alter the network of meaning/forms already acquired in different domains.

This is to see language development as an intermental social process, closely connected with the development of thought, but also closely connected with the cultural processes and practices of the society. It seems to me that although we have a growing body of examples of practice, in developing and assessing interactive cognitive and linguistic tasks in the framework of classroom practices, we have no theory or research framework for studying them which takes seriously intermental process and the wider context, including the socio-historical background of utterances in which speakers take up positions in the language.

It is crucial that language and cognitive development be seen to reflect the opportunities and support given for participating in what Francis calls the public range of ways of knowing and communicating if educational inequalities are not to be perpetuated. Equally, it is essential to re-evaluate the criteria for evaluation which produce that development. Language is a social myth as well as a social practice.

I should like to end this paper with a quotation from Stuart Hall (1983, pp6-7), who calls on us to reject the myth of a natural curriculum which 'has never been good enough for the ruling classes but is somehow OK for the ruled. There is no such thing. In fact, every curriculum is constructed through a set of emphases and exclusions and every one is shot through and predicated on certain values. The question is which values? What emphases? Whose exclusions? There is no escape into nature from the tough and difficult business of designing a curriculum for a specific set of social purposes.'

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank BAAL for the student scholarship which gave me the opportunity to present this paper.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

BAKER, G & P HACKER (1984). Language, sense and nonsense. Oxford: Blackwell.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

BALIBAR, R (1974). Le français national. Paris: Hachette.

BULLOCK, A (1975). A language for life. London: HMSO.

COOK, V (1985). Chomsky's universal grammar and second language learning. Applied Linguistics, Vol 6, No 1, pp 2-18.

CORDER, SP (1973). Introduction to applied linguistics. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books.

DEWEY, J (1950). Reconstruction in philosophy. New York: Mentor.

DONALDSON, M (1978). Children's minds. London: Fontana.

DOWNES, W (1984). Language and society. London: Fontana.

FRANCIS, H (1983). Minds of their own. London: Institute of Education.

GIDDENS, A (1976). New rules of sociological method. London: Hutchinson.

HALL, S (1983). Education in crisis. In: Wolpe & Donald (1983). Is there anybody here from education? London: Pluto Press.

HARRIS, R (1981). The language myth. London: Duckworth.

HATCH, E (Ed.) (1978). Second language acquisition. Rowley, Mass: Newbury House.

HYMES, D (1974). Ways of speaking. In: R Bauman & J Sherzer (Eds.) Explorations in the ethnography of speaking. Cambridge: Cambridge Unversity Press.

KESSEL, S & A SIEGEL (Eds.) (1983). The child and other cultural inventions. New York: Praeger.

LAWTON, D (1978). Theory and practice of curriculum studies. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

LE PAGE, R (1978). Projection, focussing and diffusion. Society for Caribbean Linguistics, Occasional Paper 9. University of the West Indies, Trinidad.

LITTLEWOOD, W (1981). Language variation and second language acquisition theory. Applied Linguistics, Vol 2, No 2, pp 150-158.

OLSEN, D (1977). From utterance to text. Harvard Educational Review, Vol 47, No 3, pp 257-281.

Pan' or the impossibility of children's fiction. London: Macmillan 1984.

SHARP, R and R GREEN, (1975) Education and social control. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

VYGOTSKY, L (1962). Thought and language. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.

VYGOTSKY, L (1978). Mind in society. Harvard: Harvard University Press.

WALKERDINE, V (1982). From context to text. In: M Beveridge (Ed.) Children thinking through language. London: Edward Arnold.

WALKERDINE, V (1983). It's only natural. In: Wolpe & Donald (Eds) Is there anybody here from education? London: Pluto Press.

WOLPE, A & J DONALD (Eds.) (1983). Is there anybody here from education? London: Pluto Press.